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## Identity, Religion and Construction of Community: The Case of Ibn Taymīya

Mohd Khair Eiedat\*

### Introduction

Taqī al-Dīn Ibn Taymīya (1263–1328) is still a controversial Islamic jurist and theologian. His influence is undeniable. However, the reason behind his influence is far from being clear. My main argument is that the main reason for his appeal and thus influence lies in his deliberate attempt to construct an Islamic community in which the question of identity appears to be fulfilled. In the process of that construction Ibn Taymīya created a certain narrative of Islam which has proved difficult to shake. First, Ibn Taymīya reduced ethics to sharī‘a preventing the possibility of revisiting sharī‘a in ethical context. Second, reducing the idea of politics to political authority in which he integrated with religious discourse, overpowering in the process the idea of society. A form of voluntarism even nascent individualism which were attributes of early Islamic thought was lost. The only meaningful way to engage Ibn Taymīya’s narrative is by transcending it. After all Ibn Taymīya’s narrative was no more than opinion.

Hans Küng, in his major work on Islam, referred to Ibn Taymīya under the interesting sub-heading “the victory of traditionalism” [Küng 2007: 384]. His main observation was “that neither Averroes and rational philosophy nor Ibn ‘Arabī and mysticism were to have a historical influence on Sunni Islam. That influence came from Ibn Taymīya and traditionalism” [Küng 2007: 386]. However, no meaningful explanation was offered.

Muḥammad al-Jābirī, a leading scholar on Arab-Islamic thought, referred to Ibn Taymīya in three different settings. First, he portrayed Ibn Taymīya as a critique of al-Ghazālī’s form of sufism and mysticism supporting al-Jābirī’s criticism and attack on al-Ghazālī [al-Jābirī 1991: 168–169; al-Jābirī 1984: 286]. The other is to suggest that Ibn Taymīya was in fact closer to the rationalism of Ibn Rushd (Averroes) than commonly assumed, although al-Jābirī himself offered no explanation in support of that view [al-Jābirī 1984: 325; al-Jābirī 1986: 536]. Finally, al-Jābirī suggested, though never explained, that Ibn Taymīya was motivated in his writings by a notion of Arab-Islamic identity, particularly when addressing and rejecting Greek logic [al-Jābirī 1984: 259].<sup>1</sup>

In this article I take al-Jābirī’s hint in reference to the idea of identity in Ibn Taymīya’s thought to be my central theme in explaining the reason behind the prevalence and triumph of “Ibn Taymīya and traditionalism”. The main reason behind Ibn Taymīya’s appeal lies in

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<sup>1</sup> Muḥammad A. al-Jābirī’s treatment of Ibn Taymīya and other major Islamic jurists, despite its overall value, remains very selective and even occasionally misleading. For a critique of al-Jābirī, see Ṭarabishī 2002.

his deliberate and conscious attempt to construct a notion of Islamic community in which the unsettling question of identity appears to be answered and fulfilled. Using a method of selectivity and repetition Ibn Taymīya leaves his reader overwhelmed by the weight of data and details. Ibn Taymīya's method was to mobilize as much as to convince. One can see in Ibn Taymīya's method an early and systematic use of propaganda. Repetition creates conviction.

In developing his notion of community Ibn Taymīya used and utilized to the fullest extent attributes of difference and partiality as defining features of the Islamic community. David Hume long recognized human nature related to a form of vanity [Hume 1969: 299–311]. Immanuel Kant also suggested that “partiality, the tendency to make exception on one's behalf or one's own case, is the central human weakness from which all other flow” [Gellner 1983: 2]. Difference and exceptionalism, the other attributes of identifying communities, is equally common among various ideologies and doctrines including most significantly those related to nationalism [Gellner 1983; al-Dūrī 1984; Huntington 2004].<sup>2</sup>

In religion, Ibn Taymīya adopted and advocated the notions of partiality, difference, and exceptionalism which led to the creation and intellectual support of dogma and fanaticism. Non-religious doctrines adopting partiality and difference as defining features of communities led equally to extreme forms of nationalism, racism, and ethnic cleansing [Scheper-Hughes and Bourgois 2004; Diamond 2012: 119–173].

Few Islamic theologians attempted revisiting Islamic heritage, Ibn Taymīya was no doubt one of them. His thought was, however, fixed on a single notion of community which is externally driven and emphasizing an us-them dichotomy. Moral superiority and exceptionalism were attributed to Islamic religion and equally significant to the “original” Islamic community (salaf). Ibn Taymīya then drew the conclusion that any deviation from that community (interpretation or practice) was considered to be a form of innovation (bid'a) and thus un-Islamic. Having asserted and emphasized the principle of moral superiority based on difference, Ibn Taymīya had to revisit all major Islamic doctrines from the perspective of incompatibility and contrast. This led Ibn Taymīya to rather unusual conclusions, the implications of which for Islamic thought are still very much strongly felt. One of these issues of contention is the relationship between sharī'a and ethics. Logic, even common sense, would suggest that Islamic ethics provide a framework in which sharī'a is placed and asserted. Ibn Taymīya's argument is that sharī'a is what differentiates Islamic community, thus Islam, from others (communities/religions). Ethics demonstrate similarity and common attributes; sharī'a highlights what is unique and different. Adhering to sharī'a in its details and literal interpretation is a confirmation of uniqueness of the Islamic community.

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2 Among the most important contemporary Arab scholars who attempted to make the linkage between religion and Arab nationalism was the late historian 'Abd al-'Azīz al-Dūrī. See, al-Dūrī 1984. Samuel P. Huntington, in his analysis of American nationalism, also highlighted that linkage between religion and nationalism. See, Huntington 2004.

Ibn Taymīya took the notion of the uniqueness of Islamic community to the limit. Implementation of sharī'a, a unique Islamic attribute according to Ibn Taymīya, meant establishing order and conformity within and engaging in active promotion of Islam externally, hence the centrality of jihād. Jihād was given as proof of the moral superiority of the Islamic community. Considering the high value Ibn Taymīya placed on domestic order and promotion of Islam, both considered to be attributes of the Islamic community, led him to make certain claims about political authority which are questionable. Ibn Taymīya, not unique to him but strongly emphasized in his thought, made the assertion that no community could exist independent of political authority. Political authority therefore was an integral part of the community if not the creator of such a community (order and jihād). The centrality of political authority to the notion of community led Ibn Taymīya to moral ambiguity, compromise and gray areas. Wrong doing, abuse of authority to its mandate, and even failure to carry out its duties were not translated to moral condemnation but rather to an ambiguous principle of potential greater evil. His tolerance of potential and actual abuse of political authority was not, however, translated into tolerant doctrine.

Ibn Taymīya's notion of utilitarianism is also to be approached from the same perspective of both order and promotion of Islam, underlying moral superiority of the Islamic community. Choosing between actions or attributes which are morally compromising could be judged accordingly to a scale of greater and lesser evil of order and jihād. In conclusion I examine whether the notion of utility and that of public interest which Ibn Taymīya used and utilized could be suitable as an opening for public discourse or not.

Methodologically, the analytical and synthetic methods were used applying the notion of deconstruction and reconstruction. Applying this notion to Ibn Taymīya's works, the following elements are identified: sharī'a and ethics, jihād, political authority, commanding right and forbidding wrong, utilitarianism, and innovation. I will demonstrate that all major concepts which Ibn Taymīya used add up and could be reconstructed to form a clear notion of community.

## **I. Sharī'a and Ethics**

Ibn Taymīya was no doubt a learned jurist, prolific writer and passionate about his subject matter. Yet, the quality which Ibn Taymīya lacked most was a sense of irony or appreciation of the paradox. That was true of all issues that he covered including that of sharī'a and ethics.

Quoting a conversation between Ā'isha, the Prophet's wife, and an unnamed Iraqi individual about how the Qur'an should be read and understood. The Iraqi suggested what in our terminology today we would call a reconstruction. Ā'isha responded by emphasizing that the sequence of revelation was about faith first and foremost, laying the ground for Islamic sharī'a or law. She explained that if sharī'a had been first introduced or revealed

then very few would have adhered to the faith [Ibn Taymīya 2002: 103–104]. Ibn Taymīya made no comment nor meaningful use of such a conversation. In fact, Ibn Taymīya turned what potentiality could be a very open and enlightened ethical doctrine on its head. This idea that sharī‘a should be placed in an ethical context was essentially rejected by Ibn Taymīya, creating a dogmatic Islamic doctrine which has proved to be difficult to break. Ibn Taymīya’s argument was that ethics were of no value or meaning independent of sharī‘a. In a way, Ibn Taymīya was arguing that sharī‘a was the operational definition of faith.

Ibn Taymīya wrote two books, which, according to the translation given to the titles in English, were about ethics. The first title is *al-Tuhfa al-‘Iraqiyya*, roughly translated as ‘the Iraqi Marble’. The other is *al-‘Ubūdīya* or Submission (to God). The two books are elaborations on the idea of love of God. Sincerity is the idea of faith. Sincerity and intention are what differentiate between true believers and non-believers [Ibn Taymīya 2005b: 17]. In focus and elaboration, however, Ibn Taymīya was more concerned with the manifestation of faith, or acting and behaving according to faith, rather than with a concern about the state of mind or heart. Islamic faith according to Ibn Taymīya was about “pronouncements and acts” [Ibn Taymīya 2002: 160]. “there could never be true faith unless and until believing was associated with good deeds” [Ibn Taymīya 2002: 160]. Sincerity was for God to judge, but faith was about public acts and pronouncements covering code of dress to that of engaging in jihād. In other words, faith was translated by Ibn Taymīya to a manual of mobilization and action. Faith is inseparable from acting and behaving according to sharī‘a, God’s law [Ibn Taymīya 1997: 54].

This emphasis on acting and behaving according to sharī‘a led Ibn Taymīya to make the rather extraordinary claim that the idea of true faith was partial and rather incomplete at the early phase of Islam and that faith had become complete and supreme when sharī‘a was revealed [Ibn Taymīya 2000 v.1: 342]. Ibn Taymīya, in effect, diluted the distinction between ethics and sharī‘a, elevating sharī‘a to the defining feature of faith [Ibn Taymīya 2002: 160]. Ibn Taymīya’s definition of the non-believer is that person “who denied sharī‘a” [Ibn Taymīya 2000 v.1: 487].

Recitation of the Qur’an is acting and behaving according to the Qur’an, rather than mere reading and contemplation [Ibn Taymīya 1997: 19]. The Qur’an is self evidently true and clear, meaning that the Qur’an was self-illustrative and taken as given. More importantly, Sunna, which broadly entailed the Prophet’s acts, manner and sayings as well as those of his associates, were taken to mean an operational definition of the Qur’an itself. Sunna therefore was not an appendage to the true faith, but rather an inseparable and essential part of it [Ibn Taymīya 1999: 56; Ibn Taymīya 2005b: 67]. According to Ibn Taymīya, Sunna is what makes Islam complete and detailed [Ibn Taymīya 2000 v.1: 210, 195].

For Ibn Taymīya, the idea of God is simple, namely, “the one in the sky” [Ibn Taymīya

1999: 52]. God's attributes were also simple and clearly given in the Qur'an. Nothing more was needed to be said or discussed hence the irrelevance of rational theologians arguing and debating the nature of God [Ibn Taymīya 2000 v.2: 177]. He extended his judgment of irrelevance of ahl al-kalām to cover all ideas and modes of thought which do not justify their validity without clear and explicit reference to the Qur'an and Sunna. Nothing good could be said of bid'a (innovation) which, for Ibn Taymīya, was a deviation from the true and only path. Heretics asserted that Ibn Taymīya invented the idea of change to discourage people from the Qur'an [Ibn Taymīya 2005b: 73]. They elaborated the obvious and labored in vain. They created uncertainty in the mind of the faithful and implanted seeds of discord among Muslims. Worst of all they suspended God's commandment that nothing could be learned from people of innovation but evil [Ibn Taymīya 1999: 137].<sup>3</sup>

Three ethical principles are often mentioned in Ibn Taymīya's works including; justice, commanding right and forbidding wrong, and sincerity. None of these ethical principles has an independent point of reference from that of sharī'a. All these principles are defined in reference to sharī'a. Take for example the idea of justice.

Acts of justice, he argued, are of three kinds: one is of being unjust towards oneself when violating sharī'a, say, by drinking alcohol and committing adultery [Ibn Taymīya 2002: 107]. The other kind is to act unjustly toward others, depriving them of their rights according to sharī'a (wealth and property) [Ibn Taymīya 2002: 107]. Finally, an unjust act which involves violating the rights of others, say, by stealing in order to commit a forbidden act, and thus being unjust towards oneself, as well as, say, by drinking alcohol [Ibn Taymīya 2002: 107]. Justice therefore is the implementation of sharī'a [Ibn Taymīya 2002: 107].

This is also true of the principle of commanding right and forbidding wrong [Cook 2000]. Ibn Taymīya defined the principle as an implementation and enforcement of sharī'a [Ibn Taymīya 2002: 78]. The main reason which justifies political authority is to carry out the principle of commanding right and forbidding wrong [Ibn Taymīya 2005a: 73].

Ibn Taymīya never denied individuals the right to carry out the principle of commanding right according to their abilities. Yet Ibn Taymīya placed so many restrictions on right of individuals to carry out the principle leaning heavily to restrict the implementation of the principle to political authority and religious scholars [Ibn Taymīya 2002: 79]. Placing moral responsibility on political authority only encourages timidity within society and most certainly promotes conformity and hypocrisy. It also undermines the principle of sincerity.

Legalism produces conformity, not sincerity. Ibn Taymīya no doubt highlighted the centrality of sincerity, drawing occasionally from a form of suspension of judgment on others. However, sincerity and suspension of judgment never developed into a meaningful ethical

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<sup>3</sup> Ibn Taymīya is not alone in condemning bid'a (innovation) as a threat to true faith. For example, see al-Shāfi'ī 1997 and Ibn Ḥazm 2010.

principle. Instead, Ibn Taymīya shifted his focus and concern to what may be called the public and practical manifestation of sincerity. According to him, private sincerity was for God to judge. Ethically and legally the idea of sincerity has to demonstrate itself in public. This is very clear in Ibn Taymīya's treatment of jihād. Here, the idea of jihād is a clear demonstration of love of God (i.e. sincerity). A lover, he argued, has to put his life on the line as testimony to and an expression of love. It is evidence and proof of true love. Jihād is a public demonstration of sincerity.

The notion of love was generalized to mean following the path of one's lover: commandments and actions. It also meant avoiding wrongdoings (i.e. prohibited, banned, discouraged). Sincerity therefore meant following the true path of that of sharī'a. Sincerity and legalism was one.

Equating sincerity to public acts led to demoting sincerity to a footnote in Ibn Taymīya's ethical order. The triumph of conformity was assured. No deviation from the true path was accepted, which partly illustrates Ibn Taymīya's view of innovation.

At the heart of Ibn Taymīya's objection to the idea of innovation was its potential and/or actual threat to domestic order. Conformity assured order, innovation undermined order. Nothing more was needed to justify attacking innovation. Sincerity in this context was not the appropriate point of reference. Formulated differently one could say that sincerity was for God to judge, but innovation was the responsibility of Muslims:

The reason for implementation of sharī'a was to prevent injustice and aggression. If that was the reason, then penalty and punishment in this world was disconnected from penalty in the afterlife and vice-versa. That is why salaf more often than not tended to execute people of innovation for ruining the faith, without asking whether they were non-believers or not [Ibn Taymīya 2000 v.1: 348].

Ibn Taymīya reproduced an interesting and revealing historical anecdote concerning innovation. It was about a religious scholar and head of school in Acre during the "time of crusaders". His name was al-Āmidī. He was accused of innovation. This led Abū 'Amr Ibn al-Ṣalāḥ, who was responsible for religious affairs in Acre, to dismiss al-Āmidī from running the school. This, according to Ibn al-Ṣalāḥ, was more significant than taking back Acre from crusaders! Ibn Taymīya, whose name is associated with jihād, approved Ibn al-Ṣalāḥ's act and added:

That is despite (the fact that) al-Āmidī was the most knowledgeable of his time in kalam and philosophy. And he was the best in adhering to Islam, and the most dedicated faithful [Ibn Taymīya 1999: 128].

This passage confirms two observations made earlier: first, Ibn Taymīya had no sense of

irony or an appreciation of paradox. Second, sincerity is not the central concern or point of reference when it comes to judging acts or behavior. Conformity and order were of greater value than to bother about the heart! God is the judge, meaning in the afterlife. In this world, responsibility of sharī'a is that of political authority and religious scholars (a form of elitism). Taken to its logical conclusion, they are God's representatives on earth.

By design or default Ibn Taymīya reduced the ethical to the legal. Pronouncement and acts as a definition of faith left little room for contemplation or afterthought. Islamic doctrine was a principle of action. The prevalence of God's words meant enforcement of sharī'a internally and promoting Islam externally through jihād, leading to the implementation of sharī'a. Nothing of value or religious significance was left to chance or opinion. True believers are people of action, not contemplation. Sources of knowledge were final, clear and detailed. These are Qur'an, Hadith and consensus based on the views and interpretation of salaf. Innovation was not only unnecessary but evil. Innovation strikes at the heart of Islamic unity and order, planting seeds of discord and uncertainty. Ibn Taymīya's claim of superiority (of the Islamic community) was based on the distinctiveness of sharī'a. Diluting the ethical with the legal was therefore a precondition of such a claim. Ibn Taymīya took the notion of Islamic moral superiority based on difference and uniqueness to heart. In the following section, I offer a detailed outline of such a claim.

## **II What community?**

Ibn Taymīya's intellectual project is political project. His Islamic community is also political community. It has a claim to moral superiority which, for Ibn Taymīya, is both self-evidently and historically true. Political authority plays a central role in defining and sustaining such a community, ensuring domestic order and promoting Islam (i.e. jihād) externally as an implementation to the principle of commanding right and forbidding wrong. Conformity is a virtue which ensures domestic peace and order and guarantees mobilization against the other. Innovation breeds discord and disunity is the source of evil. Partiality is self-evidently true and therefore a virtue. Tranquility and peace at home, permanent state of war with the rest.

The Islamic community is a distinctive nation based on a simple fundamental proposition, namely, that Islam is the only true and genuine religion of God [Ibn Taymīya 1997: 32–33]. Qur'an was God's revealed words to be carried out and adhered to literally as followed by his Prophet. Sunna was therefore an interpretation and translation of God's message, hence following Sunna was an integral and inseparable part of the true faith [Ibn Taymīya 1997: 17–18]. The Prophet's associates were the closest to him and therefore their manner and conduct were to be followed and implemented. The first Islamic century was the true century historically and literally.<sup>4</sup> No other century could aspire to compete with that

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4 Elevating the first century of Islam beyond history and time has made it difficult for Muslim scholars to



golden age in which the true Islamic community had existed. As for others, imitation of that golden age is the best and only option available. Reviving and reproducing such a community was Ibn Taymīya's intellectual task.

Supporting his claim of the moral superiority of the Islamic community, Ibn Taymīya reproduced a conversation which was attributed to God and Jesus. "God: I would create a nation (which was) my favorite among all others. A nation which was lacking in knowledge and tolerance. Jesus exclaimed 'how it would be possible for a nation lacking in such virtues to be God's favorite?' God responded by saying that He Himself would provide it with his own knowledge and forbearance". Then Ibn Taymīya commented that this was the quality of following the Prophet's path [Ibn Taymīya 1999: 97]. The Islamic community is a morally and scientifically accomplished community, and any suggestion of virtues' superiority to those attributed to the Islamic community is crossing the realm of faith to the world of non-belief [Ibn Taymīya 1999: 45–46]. Any shortcomings which such a community may encounter are lesser than those of others [Ibn Taymīya 1999: 45–46].

Having asserted the moral and other attributes of superiority and distinctiveness of the Islamic community, Ibn Taymīya was eager to push that assertion to the limit using the notion of contrast and dichotomy (for example believers and non-believers, faithful and hypocrite).

As for praising and condemnation, love and hate, loyalty and antagonism, they would only be established and judged by reference to God's authority, and God's authority was His Book. So all those who were believers should be given our loyalty, and those who were non-believers should be antagonized regardless who they were [Ibn Taymīya 2000 v.2: 276].

All positive attributes and virtues were given to *ahl al-Sunna* (i.e. Islamic community), others were given negative or inferior attributes [Ibn Taymīya 2000 v.2: 176–177]. Other faiths and religions were treated as being abrogated by Islam, incomplete and distorted [Ibn Taymīya 1997: 32; Ibn Taymīya 2000 v.2: 248]. Their idea of God and attributes of God were simply mistaken [Ibn Taymīya 2005b: 53].

Therefore, Muslims could not ally themselves with non-Muslims, and every effort should be made to differentiate between them, including code of dress [Ibn Taymīya 2000 v.1: 235]. Maintaining distance from others and refraining from socializing with others were also commanded [Ibn Taymīya 2000 v.1: 237].<sup>5</sup> Muslims should not imitate non-Muslims [Ibn Taymīya 2005b: 54]. Failing to do so was a sign of Islamic decline and weakness [Ibn Taymīya 2005b: 54]. History, according to Ibn Taymīya, provided evidence in support of his

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revisit the Islamic faith.

<sup>5</sup> The strong anti-sentiment of Ibn Taymīya is in clear contrast to that of the discourse ethics and public reason of both Habermas and Rawls in which the emphasis is on civic values, mutual recognition, equality, and reciprocity. See Habermas 1994, also see Rawls 2005.

assertion. Ibn Taymīya contrasted the reign of the Abbasid caliphs Hārūn al-Rashīd (786–808) and al-Mahdī (775–785) [al-Dūrī 1945: 104], in which ahl al-Sunna were in command and Islam was triumphant, with that of the Buyid dynasty (932–1062) [Hourani 1991: 489] and in which Muslims were in retreat and “crusaders (were) in control of many Islamic lands and frontier posts” [Ibn Taymīya 1999: 27–29]. This happened because ahl al-Sunna were feeble and weak, whereas the people of innovation had the upper-hand [Ibn Taymīya 1999: 29].

Ibn Taymīya’s mobilization skills were very much evident. Drawing a line between those who belonged to the Islamic community and those who did not, and ensuring conformity within based on his observation that people were like a pack of cats who tended to imitate each other [Ibn Taymīya 2002: 112]. The stage was set to confront the other by introducing jihād as the main function of the Islamic community and a testimony to its moral exceptionalism [Ibn Taymīya 1997: 39].

Placing a high value on jihād was not a particularly difficult exercise for Ibn Taymīya. He quoted the prophet as saying “(the) head of faith is Islam, its backbone is praying and its crown is jihād for God’s sake.” He then commented that the crown was the highest and most honorable part of a body. So was jihād [Ibn Taymīya 2005b: 55]. Nothing, Ibn Taymīya asserted, was of higher value than that of jihād [Ibn Taymīya 2005a: 109]. Again jihād was the truest expression of a love of God [Ibn Taymīya 1997: 39–40; Ibn Taymīya 2005b: 55–56]. Other utilitarian justifications simply followed including considering jihād as the major source of revenue for the Islamic community (for example, booty, poll tax and land tax [Ibn Taymīya 2005a: 41–42, 47])

By making jihād an operational definition of the doctrine of commanding right and forbidding wrong, dependent on the function and role of political authority, Ibn Taymīya created and justified the idea that religion and politics were inseparable in Islam [Ibn Taymīya 2005a: 105]. Political authority was given the mandate to pursue God’s commitment to the Islamic community so that His words were to prevail [Ibn Taymīya 2005a: 110–111; Ibn Taymīya 2002: 144].<sup>6</sup> By elevating political authority to a status of invincibility, Ibn Taymīya was led into an intellectual trap from which he was unable to or unwilling to free himself.

Ibn Taymīya made no distinction between the individual ruler and that of political authority. For him political authority and ruler are one. It is rather striking how a project of constructing a community was dependent mainly on a single individual to fail or succeed. More significantly, Ibn Taymīya was aware of the real possibility of power abuse by authority and its moral decadence as defined by Ibn Taymīya himself [Ibn Taymīya 2000 v.2: 272–233; Ibn Taymīya 2002: 109–110; Ibn Taymīya 2005a: 51–53]. Be patient, avoid discord

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6 Denying that the notion of jihād is essentially defensive in character would also contradict the contemporary search for just global order in which only limited and confined notions of just war would be permissible. See Rawls.1993. pp. 36–65.

and continue to adhere to one's obligation. That was Ibn Taymīya's advice [Ibn Taymīya 2002: 86; Ibn Taymīya 2005a: 39–40]. There was no hint of civil disobedience in Ibn Taymīya's doctrine. Ibn Taymīya offered no explanation as to why any ruler would succeed in meeting the requirement of his project except perhaps as an appeal to God.

Ibn Taymīya's community is a political community. It is clearly marked against others, fulfilling a notion of identity based on partiality and difference. Sameness and conformity are characteristic features of its society and individualism and voluntarism are in short supply. Individuals have obligations but no sense of right whether it is fortunate to have a good ruler or not. Faith is an appropriate description in this context.

### **III Ibn Taymīya's Utilitarianism**

All of Ibn Taymīya's works contain a reference to and usage of terms which are associated with utilitarianism. Pain and pleasure, utility, beneficial and harmful are all too common [Ibn Taymīya 2000 v.2: 4–5, 177–178]. Although there is a personal dimension to Ibn Taymīya's notion of utility, namely that sincerity is the main motivation for a Muslim's act, this is not an individualistic principle like that of classic utilitarianism [Hampsher-Monk 1992: 317–332]. In fact, it is not about personal choice or a personal point of reference as far as pain and pleasure are concerned. "Any act which is not intended for God is a false one, even though it may cause pleasure" [Ibn Taymīya 2000 v.2: 180]. Thus ideas like the beneficial and harmful, right and wrong, etc., are those which correspond to and are in agreement with the purpose and intentions of *sharī'a* [Ibn Taymīya 2000 v.2: 183].<sup>7</sup>

Pain and pleasure and thus utility and harm are externally defined and ranked. For Ibn Taymīya, the prevalence of God's words, through enforcement of *sharī'a* in which *jihād* and order play a central part, is the principle against which all utilitarian calculations should be judged. It comes as no surprise then to find out that all of Ibn Taymīya's usages of utilitarian ideas were in reference to three interrelated notions, namely, *jihād*, authority, and order.

Asked who should lead an Islamic army, either a pious but weak Muslim or a wrongdoer who is strong, Ibn Taymīya had this to say: "His piety is confined to himself, but his weakness affects other Muslims, whereas wrong doing is the responsibility of the impious person, his strength is an asset to other Muslims [Ibn Taymīya 2005a: 22]. In this context, Ibn Taymīya explained why the Prophet kept Khālīd ibn al-Walīd as commander of one of the Islamic armies despite Ibn al-Walīd's wild conduct and unrestrained behavior which bordered on the un-Islamic [Ibn Taymīya 2005a: 23].

Thus as long as an Islamic ruler was carrying out his major duties including commanding

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<sup>7</sup> Moving the issue of identity from the sphere of power and political authority to that of civil society is one major attempt to counter the mobilization tendency of identity based on an anti-sentiment towards others, which is clearly the case with Ibn Taymīya. See Habermas. 2011.

right and forbidding wrong (i.e. order and jihād), one should tolerate if not overlook his other shortcomings and wrongdoings. He explains the rationale of jihād when necessarily leading to the killing of non-Muslims as “shortening their life span” [Ibn Taymīya 2002: 145]. Ibn Taymīya used a very utilitarian expression, namely “minimizing their harm” to other Muslims and to Islam [Ibn Taymīya 2000 v.2: 294].

Opposing established political authority was therefore seen as usually leading to “greater harm” than good, including the possibility of discord and wasting resources necessary for the permanent act of jihād. Muslims should adhere to their part of the bargain and meet their obligations to the ruler, even though the latter might be a tyrant and unjust [Ibn Taymīya 2002: 86; Ibn Taymīya 2005a: 39–40].

Ibn Taymīya never seemed to see the sense of irony in his doctrine nor to appreciate and take note of the paradox. Having ranked values in final and absolute terms, others have to accommodate themselves to such a requirement. Ibn Taymīya was fully aware how far his idealized notion of authority was from reality and history never supported his aspirations. That did not count for much in Ibn Taymīya’s scheme of things. One cannot of course deny the intense desire of Ibn Taymīya or the Islamic nation to regain power. Desire, however, as we all know, remains a desire. This has not dampened the spirit and determination of his followers, nor those who claim to be carrying Ibn Taymīya’s ‘torch’ in an attempt to make sure that God will have the final say.<sup>8</sup> Ibn Taymīya loved to remind his reader that God would always prevail.

## Conclusion

Ibn Taymīya’s community is an imagined community, and despite his reference to the first original Islamic community, this is a product of deliberate intellectual construction. Ibn Taymīya’s image of the Islamic community is one possible construction and certainly not the final word on such a community. The major appeal of Ibn Taymīya’s community is its simplicity; at peace with itself, orderly and homogenous, mobilized clearly marked from the outside world with which it is always in a state of war. All major Islamic doctrines including sharī‘a and ethics, commanding right and forbidding wrong, and consensus and public interest expressed in utilitarian terminology, were interpreted to support domestic peace and order and permanent mobilization in an endless state of war with others. It also has an emotional appeal reinforcing a mild sense of vanity to an extreme form of moral supremacy and superiority. Identity is markedly stated, final and absolute. There is no self-doubt and no uncertainty. The human mind literally would be in a state of stillness. For a man who was hostile to logic this

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<sup>8</sup> Ibn Taymīya’s rejection of pluralism or even a hint of pluralism is self-evident. This would highlight the difficulty if not impossibility of engaging such religious narrative with deliberate discourse. See Rawls. 1997 and Rawls. 2005.

is no mean achievement. Ibn Taymīya, despite his selective method and ad hoc interpretation, was nevertheless able to construct a simple model of an imagined Islamic community.

But there is a much darker side to Ibn Taymīya's construction. Current literature from psychology, sociology and anthropology provide ample evidence that violence is only possible when marking others out as outsiders, not belonging and different [Foucault 2001; Fromm 2002]. Ibn Taymīya's intellectual project was to nourish, support and celebrate the dichotomy of those who belong and those who did not. Instead of using religion for positive self-fulfillment, Ibn Taymīya was occupied with marking the other.

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